



Being A Beef Ambassador

by Kindra Gordon

In the past 12 months, 20-year-old Sharon Byrne has crisscrossed the country from her home state of Pennsylvania to Phoenix, Chicago, the Boston Marathon and, most recently, the New York State Fair in Syracuse — all in an effort to educate others about the attributes of beef.

Byrne, a junior at Penn State University, is one of four college-aged students chosen to travel the country and serve as an industry spokesperson on the 2009 National Beef Ambassador Team. Last October she competed with 20 other individuals on the national level for the honor.

It's a job she admits can be challenging while also balancing college classes, but one she relishes. "Beef is an industry I'm so passionate about," Byrne says.

► **Above:** Sharon Byrne (center) even wore a "Patty Melt" costume in the name of beef promotion. She is pictured with her parents Dennis and Dottie Byrne.

► **Right:** Beef Ambassadors at the New York State Fair are (from left) Sharon Byrne, Brad Copenhaver and Jessica Sampson.

Angus roots

Having grown up on an Angus cow-calf and feedlot operation near Nottingham, Pa., Byrne's interest in agriculture was sparked at a young age as she helped on the farm and participated in 4-H. Byrne's parents, Dennis and Dottie, manage Herr Angus Farms,

which recently became the second *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)-certified feedlot in Pennsylvania (See "Adding Angus value").

She credits her dad for encouraging her to compete in the state beef ambassador program when she was a sophomore in high school. Byrne earned the title of Pennsylvania Beef Ambassador that year, but she was too young to compete at the national level.

She enjoyed her year promoting the beef industry at events around the state, which also led her to become more involved with the Pennsylvania Beef Council, showing Angus cattle, and becoming more active in junior Angus activities. In 2006, as a junior in high school, Byrne earned the title of Pennsylvania Angus Queen.

She fondly recalls all of those great experiences, and says, "I'm loyal to the Angus breed. I wouldn't be where I am today without having grown up around the breed and having been involved with junior Angus activities."

Byrne went on to enroll at Penn State and, in 2008 — as a college sophomore, decided to compete for the beef ambassador title once again. This time, she made it to the national contest conducted last October in Oklahoma City, and Byrne earned one of the coveted positions on the national team. Participants were judged in the areas of consumer promotion, classroom presentation, media interview and issues response.

During her travels this past year, Byrne has put all of those skills to use in her efforts to inform and educate consumers and the media about the beef industry — from the nutritional attributes of beef to how beef producers care for their livestock.

Byrne says she and her fellow teammates have especially tried to focus their year on promoting beef's nutritious and great-tasting qualities. To do so, the Beef Ambassador Team created a brochure featuring three easy



Adding Angus value

One of Sharon Byrne's experiences during her year as a beef ambassador included a trip to Wooster, Ohio, to learn more about Certified Angus Beef (CAB) LLC. When she returned home, Byrne convinced her dad, Dennis, to consider the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) for the 600-head feedlot he manages.

"Sharon came home from that trip, and with her hands on her hips said, 'You need to do this dad,'" Dennis remembers.

Byrne has been farm manager for Herr Angus Farms for almost 25 years. The operation includes an Angus cow-calf herd and a feedlot, which are owned by the Herr family, who also own and operate a large potato chip and snack food company in nearby Nottingham, Pa. Byproducts from the food plant are used in the feedlot ration for the 1,400 head of cattle that go through the facility annually.

Byrne says he custom-feeds cattle primarily from Virginia and North Carolina — many of which are from Angus genetics, and the two packers that many of the cattle go to in Pennsylvania are CAB-licensed. Thus, he had to agree with Sharon that it was a good idea for the feedlot to gain a CAB license.

With the CAB connection, Byrne says there will be some additional paperwork and some extra guidelines will be followed with the aim of having cattle reach CAB requirements. Feedlot and carcass data will also be returned to the cattle owners.

But, Byrne believes the extra effort will be worth the added CAB premiums producers have the opportunity to gain.

"It's a good fit for many of our producers who are using good Angus bulls to capture more value for their cattle," he concludes.

beef recipes, and they've done numerous cooking demonstrations at events such as the New York State Fair.

Byrne says the response to such beef cooking demonstrations always generates a lot of interest — particularly from moms.

"They like to see recipes that are quick and easy to prepare while also knowing it provides great nutrition for their family," Byrne says.

Opportunities to teach

From her experiences meeting consumers firsthand, Byrne believes she and her fellow ambassadors have made a positive impression for the beef industry.

She says the biggest surprise to her has been that the questions from consumers are always very similar. "It doesn't matter what part of the country we are in, consumers have the same concerns. They most often want to know about beef safety, beef nutrition and beef preparation."

Recognizing this, Byrne says there are opportunities for everyone in the beef industry to take a more active role in educating consumers about these issues. "We have a job as an industry to communicate why people should eat beef," she says.

As an example, she suggests that rather than telling someone you are simply a farmer, be more prepared to communicate

a message. "Tell them that you care for the land and your livestock and that your goal is to produce nutritious, safe, great-tasting beef," Byrne says.

Byrne says college students with beef upbringings should also seek opportunities to share their beef knowledge with college friends. For instance, Byrne tries to share her passion for beef with friends in a fun setting. She often cooks beef meals when friends visit, and she has beef trivia material strewn throughout her apartment.

With two years of college left, Byrne is excited to see where the future takes her. Currently, she is majoring in recreation, park and tourism management with a focus

on commercial recreation. Byrne says she is interested in a career in agricultural tourism.

While 2009 has been a year of Byrne giving much of her time and talent to the beef industry, she believes she gained as much in return. She's appreciative of the opportunity young people are given to serve as national beef ambassadors, and concludes, "I've gained an awareness for the scope of America's beef industry and know that there are many opportunities out there." 

Editor's Note: *Joining Sharon Byrne on the 2009 Beef Ambassador Team are Jessica Sampson, Yreka, Calif.; Allison Grainger, Brenham, Texas; and Bradley Copenhaver, Blackburg, Va.*

2010 team to be selected

The 2010 National Beef Ambassador competition took place Oct. 9-11 in Fort Smith, Ark., with five candidates selected from around the country to represent the beef industry during the coming year. The top five winners each received \$1,000 cash and a \$750 scholarship from the American National CattleWomen (ANCW) Foundation. Named to the 2010 Beef Ambassador Team were Malorie Bankhead from California; Rebecca Vraspir from Wyoming; Ellen Hoffschneider from Nebraska; Jackson Alexander from Oklahoma; and Mandy-Jo Laurent from Texas.